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ABSTRACT

During the last four years, the English Department at Idaho State University embarked on an ambitious program of change in their writing program. The English Department established a cross-curricular writing course as a new, required course to bridge the gap between the freshman and junior years; a remedial writing course as a new, required course for those students who need a writing course before the freshman writing course; and sets of guidelines for the freshman writing course and for the junior-level required writing courses (business, technical, and literature). The Graduate Studies Committee (within the English department) set in place a new mentor program for teaching assistants. New guidelines for the use of computer classrooms were established and assumptions about the teaching of composition as a whole were reexamined. Guidelines for new courses are formulated by the composition committee, a process which may take years. Guidelines are quite specific: they describe the goals for the course, establish its content and the skills the students will learn, and detail the kinds of documents to be produced, the kinds of reading materials to be used, the policies concerning attendance, plagiarism, and so on. The slow process of change often results in compromise; the faculty find themselves negotiating with reluctant faculty members within the department and with an often reluctant administrator. (A figure indicating the overall structure of the writing courses is attached.) (RS)

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Harold Hellwig

"Changing Needs in a Composition Program"

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Harold Hellwig

"Changing Needs in a Composition Program"

The Department of English at Idaho State University embarked on an ambitious program of change during the last four years in our writing program. As a member of the Composition Committee in the English Department at Idaho State University, I have helped to implement major changes in our writing program within these four years. I would like to discuss political realities and idealistic goals: how the university and our own department fostered or hindered radical changes in our composition courses. We set in place a cross-curricular writing course as a new, required course to bridge the gap between the freshman and junior years; a remedial writing course as a new, required course for those students who require a writing course before the freshman writing course; a set of guidelines for the freshman writing course; a set of guidelines for the junior-level (required) writing courses (business, technical, and literature); and watched, as our Graduate Studies Committee (within the English Department) set in place a new mentor program for teaching assistants to accommodate some of our changes. We established as a department new guidelines for the use of computer classrooms and re-examined our assumptions about the teaching of composition as a whole (including graduate student programs). I would like to discuss how these changes were achieved, and at what cost, within the political structure of our university and department. These changes demonstrate how our department plans to meet the future needs of our students.

I should describe briefly the sequence of courses that we now offer. The handout, page one, indicates the overall structure to our writing courses. Normally, freshman students are placed, based on ACT scores and other criteria, in either a remedial writing course, English 51, or a freshman English course, English 101. They are also tested on the first day of class with a diagnostic exam that is used to place students in the appropriate course. We are still trying to regularize the process of placement; we should, by next summer, have fully implemented a placement exam for incoming freshman, one based on ETS

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procedures for a holistically graded placement exam. That is one of our ongoing changes that I won't have time to discuss here. Then, in the second year, students enroll in a research skills and cross-curricular writing course, English 201. This course, English 201, is now required of all students at the university as of 1989. Students, depending on their majors, finally take an advanced writing course: English 307 with a technical writing emphasis, English 308 with a business communications emphasis, or English 301 with an educational and literature emphasis. You won't see the writing about literature course on your flow diagram, simply because we are now teaching a pilot section, and we won't offer until next year the "real thing." Some students, by the way, because of their majors, do not have to take a junior-level course. Much of this sequence of courses is new to the department and to the university. We had in place, prior to 1987, freshman English, technical writing, and a few advanced writing courses. The new courses, remedial writing, business communications, educational and literature writing, cross-curricular writing, all fit needs of the university and of students in our programs.

Our goals are simple: 1) We want to respond to research in writing and to changes in our society, nationally and locally, 2) We want to offer our students the best available programs so that they could stay in school and succeed in their chosen professions, and 3) We want to enhance our own reputation as a university. Research about writing and the teaching about writing offered us new ideas for curricular changes: process writing, computer-aided writing, and social roles in writing and teaching, among other areas discussed in the field and in journals, suggested that we re-think how composition should be taught. We now use group writing exercises, we emphasize the process of writing, we encourage extensive revision, we encourage teachers to explore current pedagogical strategies. Students at ISU have not always succeeded in our academic environment; we now make a concerted effort at retention, at keeping students in courses, to reverse a trend that might mean ultimate failure for those students. Finally, we fight for funds on the state level: we compete with three other state universities, and we annually argue for more money for our programs. By becoming a recognized leader in the state of Idaho, we hope to increase the size of our programs and to win a competitive share of the funds for education.

Our funding remains at the 2nd or 3rd rank, even though ISU is as large as other universities in the state. We need to demonstrate to the state legislature that better programs, improved grades and retention rates should be rewarded with a co-equal status in the state.

The Department of English isn't the only program or department making major changes to our curriculum: we have a Pharmacy program that has exploded in size, attracting much interest nationally and attracting new students; the College of Business has made significant progress in its increasing visibility as a major research and teaching program; the Department of Accounting, for example, has with its CPA review classes, achieved a national reputation for its very high success rate in students passing the CPA exam; and the list goes on. It's safe to say that all colleges and universities should be open to change; ISU is currently undergoing that period of growth and change.

But, of course, you're here to see how our composition program has changed over the last four years, and to hear how those changes have affected students, faculty, and the curriculum. I should note that our usual practice in the Department of English has been to develop a new course based on an immediate need, and then later define the course in a formal way after considerable discussion in numerous faculty meetings. We meet the immediate need after careful consideration by the Composition Committee with pilot courses or experimental sections of the course. The Composition Committee, composed of faculty members who primarily teach writing courses, including creative writing, business writing, technical writing, and writing about literature, is usually the most active committee in the department. I've been on this committee since 1987, and I'm now the longest-serving member. While the committee members have changed over the years, our long-range goals were generally fixed in 1987, and we generally agree on the implementation of those goals. Anyway, once the pilot courses have been taught, the Department of English assigns the Composition Committee the job of formulating guidelines for the new course. That process may take years; it took about three years to develop guidelines for Business Communications, for

example.

These guidelines are quite specific: they detail the number of pages to be written by students in the course, the kinds of documents to be produced, the kinds of reading materials to be used, the policies concerning attendance, plagiarism, and so on. The guidelines also describe the goals for the course at some length. These goals are especially important, because they establish not only the content of the course, but also the skills that students will learn. We want students to master these specific skills so that our teaching remains consistent throughout our curriculum. We depend, for instance, on students knowing how to use various index systems in the library, so that our junior-level students can use those resources when they first begin their advanced writing course. These guidelines are official documents, and the deans of all the colleges, as well as students and administrators, use them as formal references. We are held accountable by these guidelines, and we hold instructors to them. That may explain why it takes so long sometimes to agree to the guidelines in faculty meetings. The guidelines for all of the composition courses are now more or less in place, and we are generally comfortable with the consistency and the principles we have designed for these writing courses.

Research and commentary about cross-curricular writing energized the department into developing a sophomore-level course that emphasizes research skills, writing skills, and cross-curricular reading and writing skills. Many departments, faculty, and programs in the university requested that we have in place a research skills and cross-curricular writing course, to bridge the gap between Freshman English and any junior-level writing course that students may take. We began to develop that course in 1987-88, to offer it on a trial basis in 1989, and to teach it currently as a full-fledged course, English 201. We currently have 25 sections of the course, and we will offer 24 sections in the fall semester of 1991. We've been quite liberal in appropriating ideas for the structure and the materials of the course: we've used standard texts for cross-curricular courses and we've looked at models of those courses from many universities. As of 1989, English 201 is now required of all students at the university.

The faculty have generally accepted this new course as a required course, although there's still some confusion as to when or if all students must take that course. As with all of our changes, catalogue copies sometimes conflict with each other. For instance, a student entering the university prior to 1989 may not have to take English 201, because different rules apply for a different catalogue year. But in the College of Business, where some students certainly enrolled before 1989, all students are being required to take the course anyway. Officially, the College of Business considers this a retroactive decision, that students should enroll in English 201 before taking another required composition course. To add to the confusion, occasionally students manage to petition out of the College of Business requirement. The Department of English sometimes needs to double-check these petitions in order to make sure that the petition is in the best interest of the student.

We developed guidelines for English 201 by 1989. At the same time the Composition Committee managed to design guidelines for English 101. The debates during faculty meetings on these two course guidelines was long and sometimes painful. Quite often the Composition Committee had to defend its position on perceived changes, because of what the guidelines said, when faculty members who had taught freshman English for many years found fault with new procedures or issues raised by the guidelines. I do not have the time to present the many debates even as a summary of highlights. One example may suffice. In English 201, the Composition Committee felt that at least three documentation styles (MLA, APA, CBE) should be taught, and the faculty disagreed, saying generally that these styles may be taught, but should not be required, as the Committee had suggested. There's no general reason why the debates happened, but at least there were no fistfights. The faculty seemed to be quite concerned with the guidelines for our freshman English and our cross-curricular writing courses, and we were able to compromise to everyone's relief.

The guidelines for English 51, remedial writing, however, may have drawn metaphorical blood. We have

yet to agree to a complete, useful definition of the course. Some of the English Department members feel that the course lacks the content of a university-level course, while others are still striving to give it full legitimacy. We were able to agree on the guidelines eventually, but we are quite likely to tinker with its goals and aims in the future. As a brand-new course to campus, we had to hire someone qualified to teach it and someone to administer the remedial writing program. We now offer at least six sections of remedial writing per semester. We first hired an administrator in 1988, someone eminently qualified in writing theory and administration; that person was also in charge of a writing lab designed to help all students throughout campus in writing skills. We have had a writing center for many years, but that center had no clear direction and no firm budget to pay for it. The department and the university made a firm commitment to the writing center by hiring a writing center director and by establishing a secure budget for the center. The Writing Center Director, an active member of the Composition Committee, was also in charge of remedial writing, and taught a section or two himself. We hired a remedial writing instructor in 1989, after defining in an informal way what we had in mind for the course. We taught the course experimentally at that time.

Unfortunately, remedial writing, English 51, became a political football on campus, one that was hard to manage. The salary for the remedial writing instructor came, in part, directly out of the enrollment for the course; the university insisted that students taking the course had to pay an additional fee of 120 dollars, and the money collected went toward the instructor's salary. We found it quite unfair to students to charge them additional fees, just so that they would have a better chance at passing their courses. We also originally wanted to offer more remedial writing courses, but we found ourselves limited by the university to one instructor for the course. We found ourselves reluctantly agreeing to an ACT score of 16 as a cut-off score as a temporary means of placement; that more or less guaranteed an enrollment filling only four to six sections of remedial writing. The Composition Committee strongly felt that a higher ACT score of 18 should be the cut-off value as a temporary measure, and that eventually we should use a placement exam to assess a student's skills, and then assign that student to the appropriate

course, either English 51 or English 101. The president of the university once addressed our concerns in a faculty meeting by simply stating that the money did not exist for two positions, and that the fee would remain in place.

It took considerable restraint on the faculty's part not to have a shouting match with the president. Slow but sure pressure has finally--and to me, mysteriously--reduced the fee to 30 dollars; the university has also promised to eventually pay for remedial writing as a regular line position. We still are waging guerilla warfare on remedial writing, to hire additional faculty, but there's no clear indication when or if we ever succeed. Sometimes, deliberate and persistent diplomacy works. I can only suspect that the Director of Composition and the chair of the English Department persuaded the person in charge of retention and enrollment on campus to discuss this financial issue with the president. It's difficult to tell potential students that they may have to pay extra fees, when other schools do not charge for remedial writing courses, and our university enrollment director probably saw the light. She simply knew that it made her job more difficult. She also probably realized that our retention rates improved once we had established a remedial writing program.

One more problem with our remedial writing course, one that found no compromise, alas. The course offers no credit; students must pass it, once placed in it. It's simply a pass/fail course. Some students find that the course adds to their workload, without the compensation of a grade. Our writing center director felt that the course ought to receive university credit, and he attempted to persuade the English Department to fight for credit. A previous chair of the department had created the remedial writing course as a non-credit bearing course, and the university's official position was that the course did not appear to be an ordinary university course, and that it should not receive university credit. The writing center director felt strongly that, given the fee structure to the course, students would work more seriously in the remedial writing course, if they could receive some credit for their efforts. The Composition Committee first agreed with his position, and we brought it to a faculty meeting. But, in

a number of faculty meetings, we learned that the university would be opposed to granting credit to remedial writing. Even members of the Composition Committee realized that, given a reluctance in our own department, it was a problem we ourselves were creating. Fighting the president on this one issue would damage the progress we had already made with establishing remedial writing. We weren't even sure if he supported the remedial writing program to begin with, given his reluctance to fund the program. The debate within the English Department on granting credit to the course proved to be a waste of time. I am now persuaded, perhaps reluctantly, that glacial changes are better than precipitous ones. One footnote: the writing center director later left the university, because his spouse found employment elsewhere. We respect the former writing center director, but we are now quite content with our new writing center director, who seems particularly adept at diplomacy. She has made significant progress, for example, in persuading the university to use a placement exam for entering freshman. We think that the university will begin to recognize the importance of the remedial writing program once we have demonstrated the very real writing weaknesses of some of our students, something that can not be measured adequately by ACT or SAT scores. University administrators would prefer a straightforward ACT score, but we are beginning to see our careful campaign to give remedial writing real substance work. If, at some later time, we feel as a department that we can support a remedial course for credit, we may reconsider granting credit.

We also developed a business communications course, aimed at students in the College of Business. The College of Business actually had in its old curriculum a writing course listed in what is now the Department of Management. The College of Business hired one of the Department of English faculty members to teach that course; that person left the university for a job in the governor's office in Boise, and the Department of English was selected to take over the management of the course. I'm not clear on the political situation, but I am aware that the College of Business was grateful for that change. The College of Business, by the way, still carries that Management writing course on its list of courses offered, because the former faculty member has an arrangement that allows her to return, should she wish

to. At any rate, the Department of English now offers English 308, Business Communications, a required course of all business majors. We taught experimental sections of the course in 1987 and 1988. We hired someone in 1988 to regularly teach two sections per semester, and we hammered out guidelines for the course by last year. We must be doing a good job with Business Communications. The two of us who normally teach the course were offered positions in the College of Business, at a higher salary, I might add, but we both declined.

We have offered for at least ten years a course in technical writing, English 307. I was hired to teach the course specifically, although, as I have mentioned, I teach other kinds of courses also. A number of faculty taught the course before 1987. Some departments and colleges across campus require their students to take the course, such as Engineering and Pharmacy. I wrote guidelines for the course in 1987, and the department agreed to those guidelines by 1990. Currently, we are offering only three sections of technical writing next fall. Typically, we offer six or more sections.

We just established a new course in writing about literature, a course generally aimed at education majors in English, as well as at students majoring in English. The guidelines for that course passed last year. We are running a pilot course right now, so we do not know if the course will succeed just yet. I don't have firm figures on the course, but I'm told we plan to offer at least three or four sections next fall.

As a response to our composition program changes, the Graduate Studies Committee decided that it ought to establish new guidelines for our mentor program for teaching assistants. We've had in place a mentor program for some time, but it seemed to need a better formula for running it. In the past, we assigned faculty members individually to graduate students teaching freshman English. It was fairly informal: a faculty member would visit classes, discuss pedagogical issues with the TA, and be on hand whenever needed. Some of our graduate students, our D.A. students, teach other kinds of courses also. And the same mentor program was applied to these courses, also. With new guidelines for virtually all of our

writing classes, we needed to change some of our operating procedures. One significant change: mentors now teach the same kind of course as the teaching assistant. In the past I have been a mentor to students who taught freshman English, but I did not myself teach freshman English. The mentor and the TA now both teach from the same text, a textbook used in all sections of freshman English, and both the faculty mentor and the TA use the same guidelines. If anything, the mentor program is more rigorous and systematic; the old system lacked consistency, and, frankly, the rules for governing it. Graduate students now in the mentor program take a methods of teaching course directly tailored to the guidelines and to the textbook we have selected for freshman English. While we allow for different teaching approaches--we teach alternatives in the methods class--we are now being consistent throughout our freshman English classes. The old mentor program lacked consistency; teaching assistants could often depart from the guidelines--and they did--and just about teach anything they wanted to. I once had a graduate student under the old mentor system teach elements of literature in freshman English--I had to restrain her diplomatically, but I could not simply state "those are the rules." Now we have in place the straightforward rules about writing courses and how the mentor program relates to and is governed by those rules. As it stands, faculty members like myself who teach only advanced writing courses, are rarely mentors anymore. That makes sense in my case: I haven't taught freshman English for six years, and I really have no business telling a graduate student how to teach in English 101, even if I spent considerable time helping to design the guidelines for the course.

I am also the computer "wizard" in the department, and I designed our policy toward computer-aided instruction. It will sound odd when I tell you this, but our official policy is to avoid the computer classroom. I've had over ten years experience with computer-assisted instruction, and it was with reluctance that I had to write this policy. It's a fair one, however. Our students do not have the background or the experience with computer technology as freshman students that other universities can often expect. Our average student's age is 27, and may be a returning student. I once had a literature class where the average age was at least 45. Freshman students, as a result, are often quite mature.

These students often do not have the basic skills on a computer that high school students are learning. Some of our younger students in Idaho also do not have the experience of using computers. These students are often from farms and small high schools which do not have computer technology. That's just life in Idaho. For example, I taught a one-credit class advertised as a computer classroom-based writing workshop, and I had to drop most of my course content, because I found myself teaching the simplest skills of typing and computer use. The course was supposed to teach some writing skills of revision and graphics, using WordPerfect, but that never happened. We had that course in the university catalogue, and it did not meet the catalogue copy expectations; I easily persuaded the department to drop the course. I was the last one to teach it. I can expect, and I do require, my advanced writing students to use a computer for word processing, but that's a fair and reasonable request. By the time students reach their junior year, they have acquired computer skills through their other classes. We found that using CAI at the freshman level might be unfair to most of our students, so we had to restrict experimentation in our computer classrooms. If an instructor can persuade the Composition Committee that using a computer classroom will not involve teaching basic typing skills or basic word processing skills, then we approve of that computer use. One member of the Composition Committee now teaches several sections of English 201, the research skills and cross-curricular writing course, in the computer classroom exclusively, but she does that in full cooperation with our computer policy. She does not spend any significant time on basic word processing skills. We have just approved one pilot computer-aided course in remedial writing, and our Writing Center Director, in fact, will watch the progress of this experiment on a first-hand basis. For that class, we are trying to stick to the basics of word processing, without spending much time teaching word processing. We're running a control group as well. We simply do not want our students to find themselves learning simple tasks when they should be learning how to write.

I hope that I have given you some sense of the careful concern we have had toward our writing program. I haven't the time to cover fully the changes we have sought and implemented. We have, throughout the

slow process of change, considered our students' needs, discussed at great length the possibilities for change on our campus, and implemented those changes that best met current thought on the teaching of writing and the specific demands in our state. That often results in compromise; we find ourselves negotiating with an occasionally reluctant faculty member in our own department and with an often reluctant administrator. We win more than we lose. And, after four years, I'm beginning to appreciate the value of diplomacy, the value of patience, and the value of hard work.

Composition Placement